

STATE OF CALIFORNIA
CALIFORNIA REGIONAL WATER QUALITY CONTROL BOARD
SAN FRANCISCO BAY REGION

STAFF SUMMARY REPORT (Wil Bruhns)
MEETING DATE: February 13, 2008

ITEM: 9

SUBJECT: **Habitat Protection and Restoration Programs** – Status Report

DISCUSSION: This report provides the status of the Water Board's habitat protection/restoration programs. A primary purpose of all Water Board programs is to protect beneficial uses. For many of those uses, clean water in and of itself is not enough; there also needs to be habitat to nurture the biological resources. However, much of the Region's natural water related habitat has been disturbed or destroyed by human activities over the last century and a half. Impacts on habitat include the filling of waters and wetlands, removal of riparian vegetation, putting barriers (such as dams) in streams, changing flow patterns in streams (either increasing flow through urbanization, or decreasing it by removing water from streams), changing the physical shape of the stream either by downcutting or through sedimentation, and in some cases changing the habitat through the chemistry of discharged water (such as converting salt marsh to brackish marsh by discharging fresh water).

The extent of habitat impacts is highly significant in some cases. An estimated 80% of natural bayside tidal wetlands have been filled or diked and converted to other uses (e.g., salt ponds, hay fields, urban areas, etc.). The amount of losses of riparian habitat, although not quantified, is certainly significant in many watersheds. All urban stream habitats, and most rural ones, have been impacted. Discharges of clean fresh water have converted hundreds of acres of salt marsh into brackish marsh.

The news is not all bad. The long term trend in habitat losses has been slowed, and in some cases reversed. Any new filling of wetlands or waters is now regulated by several state and federal agencies, including the Water Board. There is nationwide and statewide policy calling for no net loss of wetlands. This is achieved through requiring each proposed fill project to demonstrate that if fill cannot be avoided, any fill must be minimized, and for any fill that does occur, it must be mitigated. Mitigation needs to account for both the extent and value of the habitat destroyed and for temporal losses. In addition to protecting against wetlands loss, there are large and significant wetland restoration programs in the Region. The biggest of these are the South and North

Bay salt pond restorations, which should create about 26,000 acres of restored habitat.

While there is improvement in protecting against habitat loss, there still exist significant challenges. Money for restoration efforts is insufficient. AS reported at the January Board meeting, Save the Bay estimates it would cost over \$1.4 billion to restore about 100,000 acres around the Bay. There are also insufficient resources for agencies to regulate all fill projects, or even to track and comment on all proposed projects and local land use policies. There are also many projects that alter habitat and adversely impact beneficial uses that do not involve fill, such as the removal of riparian vegetation, that are difficult to regulate. Other challenges include local land use agencies not being aware of the need to preserve habitats. Also, many individual landowners and developers resist government direction on what they can do with their land.

The Water Board has several programs aimed at protecting and restoring aquatic habitats and beneficial uses. At the planning and policy level, staff are developing a stream protection policy. Last July the Board was briefed on this proposed policy, and staff expects to bring it before the Board for formal consideration in fall 2008. The policy would establish water quality objectives and provide guidance for staff, other agencies, and the public on measures necessary to protect streams, wetlands, and their associated habitats. In addition, the TMDL program is developing habitat enhancement plans for our high priority salmon and steelhead bearing streams impaired by sediments (Napa River, Sonoma Creek, Walker Creek, San Francisquito Creek, and Pescadero and Butano Creek). The Board regulates, through Water Quality Certifications and Waste Discharge Requirements, approximately 150 new projects each year in order to protect habitats. We also regulate large wetland restoration projects, such as those for Bair Island and the South Bay Salt Ponds, scheduled for Board consideration this spring. Several other Water Board programs have elements within them that help preserve and/or create habitat. These include flow limits in the new development portions of stormwater permits (referred to as hydromodification plans). Major cleanup sites, i.e. military bases, often include habitat restoration as part of cleanup. A large portion of the Board's grants program is directed at habitat restoration projects. Finally, staff works with other agencies and scientific efforts on projects such as the Bayland Ecosystems Goals Project to guide where restoration is most needed.

RECOM-

MENDATION: This item is a status report, no action is necessary.